

“Everything became about keeping him happy, keeping him calm”: How survivors make sense of risk, impulsivity and aggression in domestic abuse



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BACKGROUND

Domestic abuse victims/survivors’ ability to identify risk of harm is said to be an important predictor in risk assessments (Campbell, 2004; Heckert & Gondolf, 2004;Weisz,Tolman, & Saunders, 2000), and therefore assists in safeguarding victims and their children. Previous research has made links between physical violence, impulsive aggression and the personality construct of impulsivity in perpetrators of domestic abuse (Edwards, Scott,Yarvis, Paizis, & Panizzon, 2003).

Impulsivity and aggression levels are currently not measured in victim perception risk assessments used by practitioners, this study explores the potential contribution of these constructs by carrying out in-depth qualitative interviews with survivors of domestic abuse to explore how they experienced risk, and their partners’ aggression and impulsivity.

METHOD

Six semi-structured interviews with survivors of domestic abuse were conducted. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was selected as the method of analysis due to its distinctive focus on the following:

**Phenomenology** – the conscious experiences of the participants themselves, how they felt, their thoughts at the time; in IPA they are considered the expert in the phenomenon.

**Idiographic** technique – by analysing the individual, the particular, the study grasps the meaning of something for one given person.

**Interpretation** – by using hermeneutics to look at the ways people develop systems of meaning and justification that allow them to make sense out of their experiences.

ANALYSIS

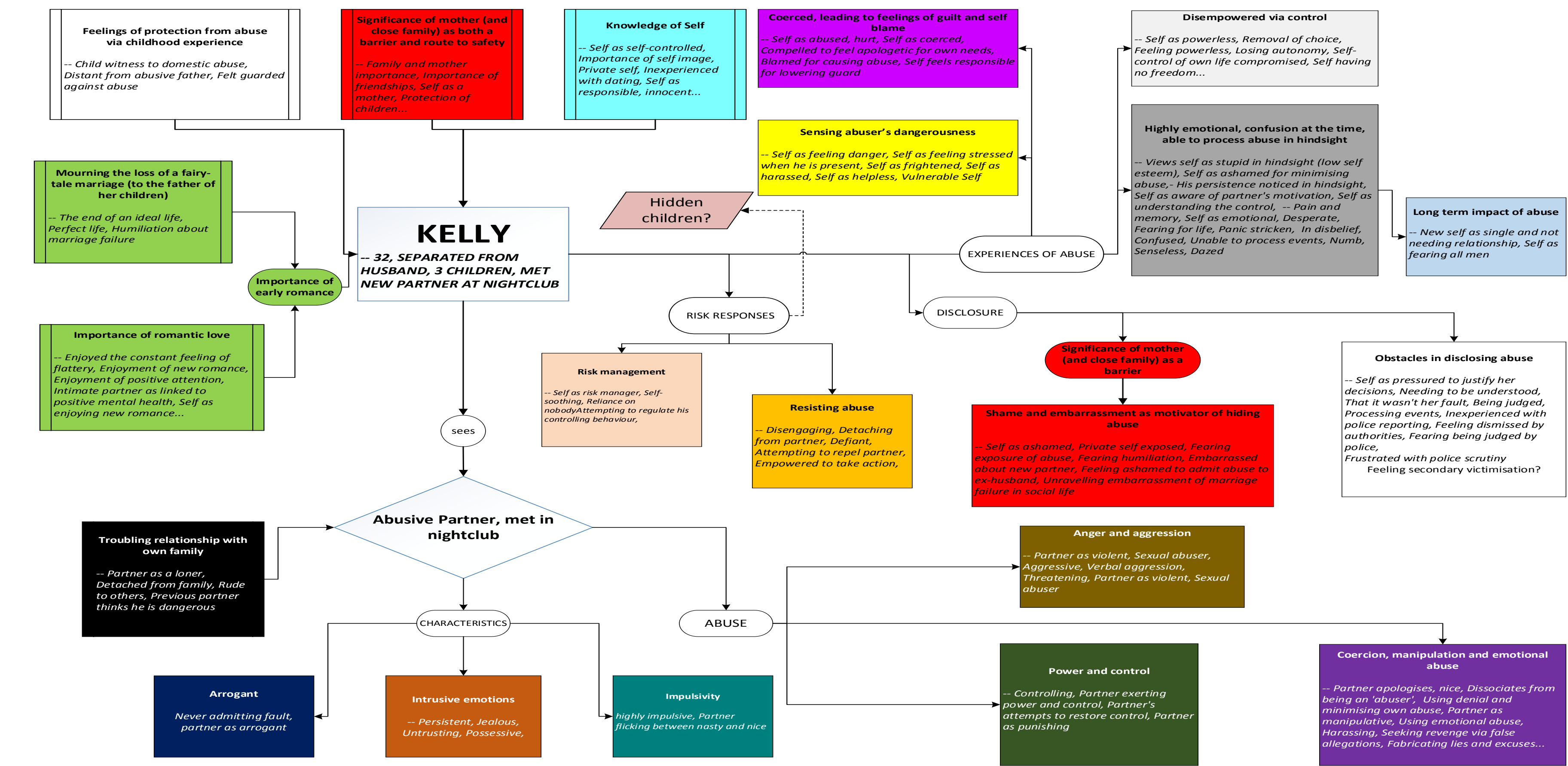


Figure 1. Example of findings from one analysis of participant named Kelly

RESULTS

The following superordinate themes have emerged: ‘Concepts of self, romantic love, and family involvement’, ‘Psychological trauma’, ‘Heightened awareness of risk, and actions of managing it’, ‘Partner as coercively controlling and aggressive’, and ‘Partner’s characteristics as intense and troubling.’



Figure 2. Quotes as illustrative examples from the analysis of the six interviews, under superordinate theme headings

CONCLUSION

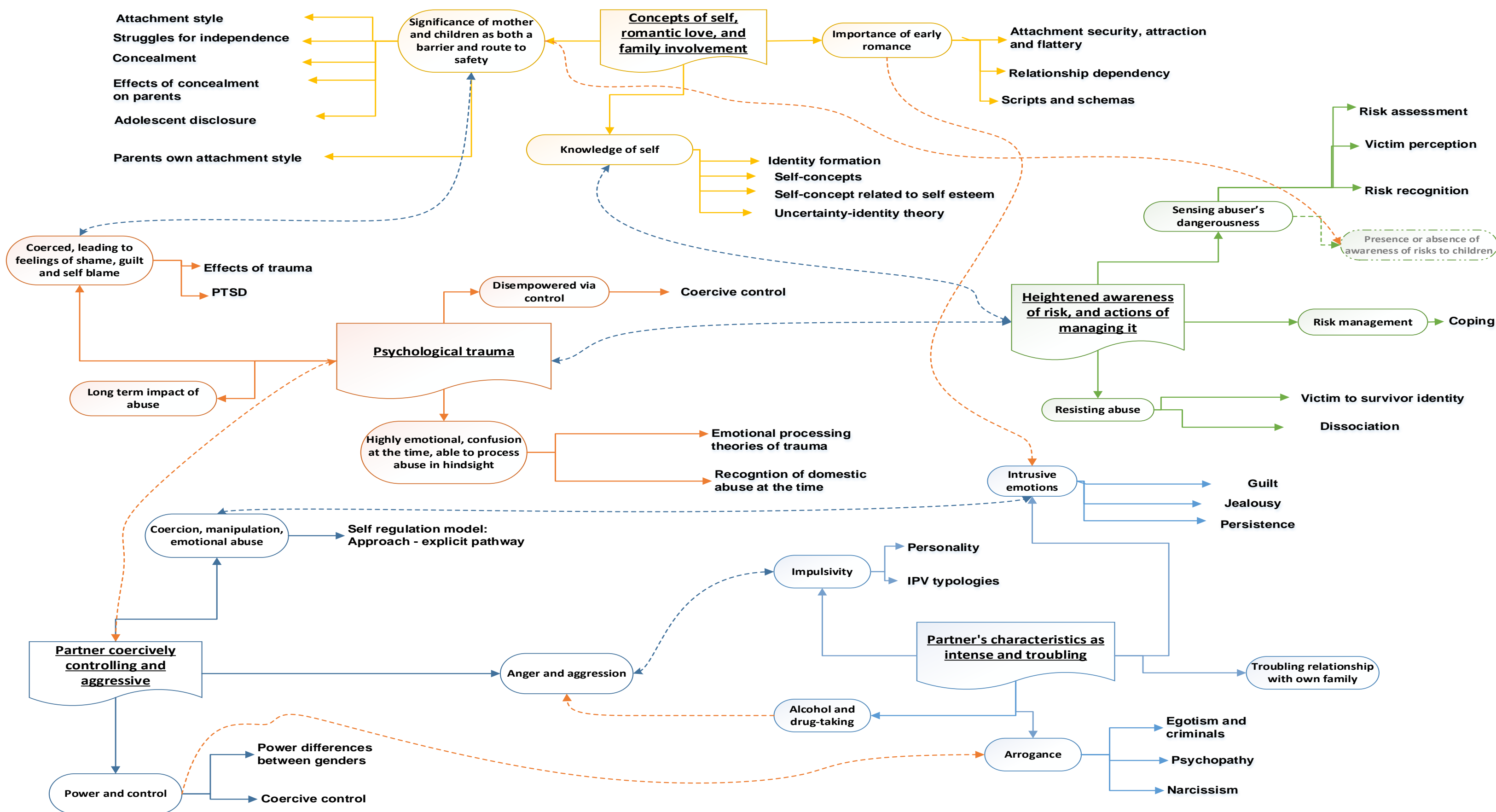


Figure 3. Map of interconnections between superordinate themes, subordinate themes and relevant theories.

This analysis revealed important findings that have implications for victim perception risk assessments, these include:

**Experiences of their partners’ impulsiveness and aggression** - Survivors in this study perceived their partners to be generally impulsive, and often aggressed unpredictably.

**Experiences of risk** - Survivors had heightened awareness of danger and risk, this translated into risk management strategies, which they used on a daily basis.

**Hidden Children** - In the two survivors that were mothers, both had differing approaches in how they acknowledged risk towards their children. While one spoke at length of the risks, the other did not acknowledge any risks during the interview.

**Mother-Adolescent Daughter Relationships** - In the survivors who experienced teen abuse, a pattern of distancing and concealment emerged towards their mothers. Yet, each time, the mother then became the rescuer and protector when the abuse became extreme and was finally disclosed or discovered.

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